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## **Dreams of John Ball: Reading the Peasants' Revolt in the Nineteenth Century**

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### **Introducing the Peasants' Revolt**

In 1381, all over England, the labouring classes rose in revolt. They attacked lawyers, abbots, tax-collectors, and royal commissioners; they burned title-deeds and manor rolls, broke open jails and liberated prisoners, occupied Canterbury, St. Albans, St. Edmundsbury, and Norwich, and marched on London. In the home counties, the leaders were Wat Tyler, Jack Straw, and John Ball, a priest who had preached equality of serf and lord for over twenty years, popularising the slogan "When Adam delved and Eve span / Who was then the gentleman?" The rebels demanded the abolition of serfdom and of tolls on buying and selling, the commutation of services for rent, and a general pardon. London opened its gates to them; John of Gaunt's palace, the Temple Bar, and the house of the Knights Hospitallers were destroyed, Flemish merchants were killed, and the Archbishop of Canterbury and Treasurer beheaded on Tower Hill. The young king Richard II persuaded a large contingent of insurgents to return home by issuing charters of emancipation and amnesty, but many thousands still remained in London under Wat Tyler. Tyler finally encountered the king at Smithfield and was stabbed by William Walworth, the mayor of London. With the fall of their leader the rebels in London dispersed, and the tide turned. The charters of manumission and pardon were annulled by Parliament, and the revolt eventually suppressed throughout the country. Many were tried and executed, including Straw and Ball, and Tyler's head graced London Bridge.

If we were modern undergraduates in history taking a course on the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, we would study its social, economic and political contexts, its causes, events, and effects. We would interpret the primary source materials – from the chronicles of Froissart,

Walsingham, Knighton, and Holinshed, and the literary works of Gower and Langland, to annals, manorial records, and the Rolls of Parliament. We would consider the problems associated with their use, and engage with the historiographical debates that have long raged over this symbolic moment in English history. Was the Revolt caused by high taxation, by the propaganda of religious radicals, or by the landlords' and government's economic repression after the Black Death? How does one deal with the striking differences of "fact" in the many contemporary accounts of the event? We would be referred to a number of modern studies of the demographics of medieval peasant society, the standards of living, the Black Death, and agrarian history. If we did some research on our own we would find a whole wealth of secondary literature on the topic.

If we were Victorians, rather than twenty-first century undergraduates, the description just given would still hold in all of its details. The range of sources and the virulence of historiographical debate were effectively the same; the variety of ideologically-inflected interpretations and the corresponding printed output was, if anything, greater. A Victorian interested in the Peasants' Revolt could consult scholarly editions of primary sources, footnoted academic treatises or popular children's histories, illustrated historical romances, cheap political pamphlets, or expensive private-press *objets d'art*. The material heterogeneity mirrored an ideological one: the interpretation of the Peasants' Revolt was a battleground for Anglicans and Catholics, for Liberals, Tories, and socialists. Each retelling: fictional or historical, academic or popular, supposedly neutral or avowedly partisan, presented a different version of the event. No two agreed on all the facts, let alone on the placement of political emphases, or the analysis of causes and effects. There was no consensus even on the basic elements of the historical narrative, such as the identity of the leader of the Revolt Wat Tyler, the religious affiliation of its ideologue, the priest John Ball, or the rebels' actions and demands. According to Bishop Stubbs's monumental

*Constitutional History of England*, there were at least five different Tylers mentioned in the primary documents, and whether an author chose to identify the Tyler of Dartford who killed a tax-collector for insulting his daughter with the Tyler who led the rebels to London spoke volumes about his view of the causes of the Revolt. As for John Ball, he was alternately a “mendicant friar,” or a “parochial chaplain” at odds with the friars, a “poor,” “hedge,” or “russet” priest of Wyclif’s, or an anti-Lollard preacher (Egan 795; Maurice 143; Stubbs; Green; Rogers; Leatham; Morris; Henty). Those who followed Froissart said he came from Kent, those who read Walsingham asserted that he operated chiefly in Essex.<sup>1</sup> John Ball’s famous speech was usually taken verbatim from Froissart; Walsingham’s more extreme version, which had Ball call for the murder of all lords and lawyers, was very rarely cited. On the other hand, the claim that the rebels routinely murdered lawyers on their way to London was taken at face value by a large proportion of commentators, while the rest dismissed it as an exaggeration on the part of prejudiced chroniclers. Some blamed the peasants for the persecution of the Flemish merchants, others insisted that it was the citizens of London and not the well-behaved insurgents who were taking revenge on their trade rivals. Some, referring to the alleged testimony of captured rebel leaders, asserted that they planned to abolish feudalism and create a Cromwellian-style dictatorship; others maintained that their demands were mild and respectable, entirely in line with the values of liberty and property dear to the middle-class heart.

It is evident to what extent the interpretation depended on choice of sources, and if the primary documents contradicted each other, the Revolt’s long reception history in the intervening centuries only added to the confusion. John Cleveland, David Hume, Tom Paine, and Robert Southey were just some of the famous writers who had condemned or celebrated the peasant insurgents. Penny pamphlets in the Regency period, plays during the agitation for the Reform Bill, Chartists in the 1840s, all invoked Wat Tyler, Jack Straw, and John Ball.<sup>2</sup>

Old ballads and popular political songs about the rebel leaders were collected by antiquarians like Thomas Wright in the first half of the nineteenth century, and used as evidence in the second half by professional historians like William Stubbs.

### **Publishing Primary Sources**

The medieval chronicles were also reprinted regularly, but this did nothing to stem the proliferation of interpretations, as can be seen when one compares the various editions of Froissart available to Victorian readers. I will leave out of account the numerous French language editions published in Paris and Brussels: there were many more of these -- augmented, annotated, modernised, or abridged by a whole army of editors for the Royal Academy of Belgium or la Société de L'histoire de France -- than in Britain. But one translation from the French, “with Variations and Additions from Many Celebrated MSS” by Thomas Johnes, Esq. (1748-1816) -- a Welsh landowner and man of letters renowned primarily for his agricultural experiments -- was reprinted in London numerous times throughout the century (from c. 1803 onwards). The five-volume Hafod Press and the twelve-volume Longman editions were superseded by a two-volume edition published by William Smith, and subsequently reissued by H. G. Bohn in the 1840s, 50s, and 60s, and by Routledge until the 1890s. It featured illustrations from fifteenth century manuscripts, and “A Life of the Author, An Essay on His Works, and a Criticism of His History” by Jean-Baptiste de la Curne de Sainte-Palaye. An abridged version of the Johnes translation, condensed and annotated by H. P. Dunster, appeared in the 1840s and remained in print until the Edwardian period when it was included in Dent’s Everyman’s Library. A Kelmscott Press edition of Froissart was long in planning, but never issued. In 1901 a six-volume Tudor translation (1523-5) by Sir John Bourchier, Lord Berners, with an introduction by the philologist and critic W. P. Ker, was published by David Nutt as part of their Tudor Library.

The Nutt firm at this time specialised in medieval and early modern material, producing a range of series on folklore, romances, sagas, and Shakespeare's contemporaries.<sup>3</sup> The year before (1900), the Tudor series had featured Thomas Hoby's 1561 translation of Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier*, edited by another important man of letters and university professor, Walter Raleigh.

The thing to note about all these editions is in fact a fairly obvious one -- the way the publisher's agenda shaped content. The Froissart that one encountered in the physically handsome and archaic sounding Berners translation was not the one available to the readers of the abridged Everyman. And if this was the case with a primary historical text, how much more variation was engendered by the transmission of the same narrative in secondary accounts, where the author, as well as the translator, editor, and publisher, could exercise his or her will over the selection, interpretation, and representation of several different sources? Although that is the great epistemological question of all history writing, with the Peasants' Revolt it often came down to the fairly banal issue of which chronicle translation the author chose to use.<sup>4</sup> But what if he went back to Froissart's original French? And what about the editorial history of Walsingham's *Historia Anglicana* or Knighton's *Chronicon Angliae*? To address this point adequately one would have to deal at length with the production of the Rolls Series: that monumental government-sponsored Victorian publishing project (1858-1911) of over 250 volumes of medieval chronicles and memorials.<sup>5</sup> Professional historians were certainly beginning to use archives systematically, but unless a writer of popular tales or of political propaganda had, like William Morris, a rich collector's access to the original manuscripts, he had to rely on the sources made available by contemporary publishers.

### **Interpreting Format**

It goes without saying that when dealing with the wealth of secondary accounts, it pays – as with the primary ones -- to begin with the details of publication. Before one reads a single word, the title page, the textual apparatus, and the material form of the book already signal its interpretative angle. The ideological slant of a thick volume by William Stubbs -- a Regius Professor of History published by the Clarendon Press in Oxford -- will not be that of a one-penny pamphlet composed by the socialist propagandist James Leatham and issued by the Twentieth Century Press in London -- the house press of the Marxist Social Democratic Federation. This much a reader may guess merely from glancing at the covers, and when she comes to the texts themselves, her assumptions will be confirmed. In the former case she will read that John Ball spread “through the country perverted social views in the guise of religion” (Stubbs 2: 473). The phrase is not only an expression of Stubbs’s own Toryism, but a direct translation -- as one would expect from an editor of the Rolls Series and a professional historian published by a university press -- of the chroniclers’ exact words (Walsingham and Knighton: “perverted doctrine” (*perversa dogmata*)).<sup>6</sup> From James Leatham, on the contrary, she will learn that Ball was a “popular preacher” of “communistic doctrines” based on the “practice of the early Christians” (4, 16). This, again, is not just evidence of the author’s own political allegiances, but an opinion plainly garnered from the more accessible secondary accounts of J. R. Green, James Thorold Rogers, and William Morris, which enjoyed a wide currency in the socialist movement, and which all insisted on the socialistic nature of the priest’s propaganda.<sup>7</sup>

Let’s take another example. If a story of the uprising is written by an Anglican clergyman (the Rev. William Edward Heygate) and published as part of a Church of England-sponsored series of “Historical Tales For Young Men and Women,” then a reader may safely assume that he is not dealing with the same kind of Peasants’ Revolt as that described in one of his weekly numbers by Pierce James Egan, a pioneer of the cheap and

sensational “picturesque” historical novel, author of *Robin Hood*, and contributor to *Reynolds’s Miscellany* and the *London Journal*. Egan’s “gallant” hero Wat Tyler wants to “effect a grand moral revolution,” and delivers rousing page-long speeches full of popular radical sentiment in favour of parliamentary representation and equality before the law, and against an oppressive and unjust “aristocracy ... high in toryism.” “Merry England,” says Jack Straw at the end of the universal jubilation that greets Tyler’s decision to lead the uprising, “shall once again be the merry happy place she was ere these grasping heartless nobles turned it from a paradise to a vale of misery” (817, 794, 802). The Rev. Heygate in his anti-revolutionary *Alice of Fobbing; or, The Times of Jack Straw and Wat Tyler* is equally guilty of anachronism, but errs in the opposite direction:

God be praised that the temptation has never been ours ... to head a rebellion. Whatever the provocation, whatever the justification, it is a fearful condition that state of rebellion. Henceforth we can no longer feel for poor Wat. He appears before us in history as the desperate insurgent, drunk with success, and not desirous of peace. Alas for the day and shame on the deed which changed the peaceful tiler of Dartford into a shedder of blood, a fierce rebel; and then a bleeding and despised corpse, lying like a dead dog in Smithfield!  
(24)

That such words should be found in a book advertising “Historical Tales Illustrating the Chief Events in Ecclesiastical History,” written “upon sound Church principles,” is hardly surprising (Heygate 2). Indeed, the front and back advertising pages give particularly good clues to the historical biases of the narrative to be found between them. In Heygate’s case we have titles like *Sacred Prints for Parochial Use*, *Cottage Pictures from the Old and New Testaments*, and a *Church of England Illustrated Magazine*; in Leatham’s pamphlet we have *The Class War*, *The Story and the Meaning of the Commune of Paris*, and *The Historic Basis of Independent Labour Representation*. Nothing more needs to be said. Whether the author will take the side of the nobles or the peasants, whether the medieval rebels will be cast as incipient Liberals, Chartists, democrats, or communists, a disorganised foolish mob led by rabble-rousing traitors to King and Country or an army of liberation moved by a common



will to the abolition of feudalism and the establishment of a new and better society, may in some cases be guessed from the bibliographical data alone.

### **The Limits of Extrapolation**

But information about the publisher, the price, and the intended market cannot always reveal the interpretative agenda of the author; sometimes it may be positively misleading. The Rev. Heygate's 1860 novella cost only a shilling in paper covers; while thirty years later the Kelmscott vellum edition William Morris's *A Dream of John Ball*, of which only 11 copies were printed, sold for ten guineas. The intended audience was popular in the one case, and exclusive in the other (the Kelmscott Press produced 300 paper copies at 30 shillings), but though more downmarket and directed at a larger readership *Alice of Fobbing* was anything but democratic in its intent. Heygate was writing High Church socially conservative propaganda, as was to be expected from the author of *Catholic Antidotes* (1858), *Meditations for the Clergy* (1860), and *A Devotional Manual for the Married* (1850). Morris's *Dream*, on the other hand, quickly became a famous statement of socialist fellowship. It did help matters that his story was available in at least three different formats: it was originally serialised in Morris's one-penny socialist weekly the *Commonweal*, and the cheap paper-cover edition released by Reeves and Turner in 1888 retailed, like the Rev. Heygate's, at one shilling.

Hasty assumptions about readership can prove equally unfounded. Socialists and Anglicans were not expected to learn about the Peasants' Revolt solely from didactic fiction disseminated by their respective sectarian presses and periodicals -- any more than serious students of history and economics were meant to turn exclusively to university press publications,<sup>8</sup> or general readers wishing to be instructed and entertained resort only to popular accounts and novels from reputable London publishers. Boundaries were never so

clear-cut. Important historical works like J. R. Green's *Short History* (Macmillan) were published outside Oxford and Cambridge throughout the period, while blatant socialist propaganda, like H. M. Hyndman's *The Historical Basis of Socialism in England*, which used Tyler and Ball to prove that socialism was a native growth rather than a "foreign importation," was released by a mainstream house (Kegan, Paul, Trench) that also had Stevenson and Meredith on its list (4). People's reading was never circumscribed by publisher or political affiliation. Students did not feed on an exclusive diet of Clarendon volumes, nor socialists -- *pace* Gissing's Richard Mutimer -- on an undifferentiated fare of pamphlets from the various small Labour, Fabian, and Marxist presses.

Authors, of course, could be as promiscuous as readers, and in the case of someone like Morris political intent was no more straightforwardly related to publishing format than to the choice of sources. But just as format, if used with care, can offer insights into authorial intent, the rationale behind source selection can also be revealing. Morris brought up the Peasants' Revolt more than once in his periodical publications: there was an entry on Wat Tyler in the *Commonweal's* "Revolutionary Calendar," and a critique in the Social Democratic Federation's organ *Justice* of the 1884 "Lord Mayor's Show," which had featured a re-enactment of Tyler's assassination. Throughout, Morris relied predominantly on Froissart's chronicle: the primary source specifically dismissed by the Marxist James Leatham and the radical historian Charles Edmund Maurice (a friend of Morris's not to be confused with the Christian Socialist F. D. Maurice) in favour of the more reliable Knighton and Walsingham. But the chronicle's self-evident anti-rebel bias in no way interfered with Morris's purpose: propaganda, like fiction, was above such niceties. Froissart's "Gothic love of incident prevents his prejudice from damaging his account of facts too much," Morris asserted in "The Lord Mayor's Show," "Besides it seemed to him so natural that such things should be, that he never thinks of softening any enormity of the lordly tyranny which he

served.” And so, with Froissart’s supposed “naiveté” guaranteeing the accuracy of his descriptions, if not his judgements, Morris could proceed to point the socialist moral (2). The methodological attitude of C. E. Maurice, who was attempting to write a mainstream history of the *Lives of English Popular Leaders in the Middle Ages*, and who had to rely on the goodwill of eminent scholar friends like Furnivall, Stubbs, Green, and Freeman, was very different. “Froissart,” he wrote,

having been in France during most of the insurrection, and looking at the matter purely from the courtier’s point of view, is far less trustworthy than Knighton, who ... is by far the most careful and moderate historian of his time. But Walsingham has entered so much more than Knighton into the detail of the matter, and had besides, as a monk of St. Alban’s, such special opportunities of information, that I generally follow him in doubtful cases. (vii-viii)

This kind of careful weighing of sources was often, as one would expect, a hallmark of self-consciously professional treatments of the Revolt. It usually came in tandem with listings of “authorities” at the beginning of chapters, acknowledgments of contemporary academics in prefaces, and copious footnotes referencing sources in the original Latin or Anglo-Norman -- administrative records and Rolls of Parliament alongside the ubiquitous chroniclers. If one compares the page layout of William Stubbs’s *Constitutional History of England* or C. E. Maurice’s volume on *Tyler, Ball, and Oldcastle* with Charles Dickens’s footnote-free *A Child’s History of England*, the differences cannot fail to strike the eye. They have to do most obviously with the increasing specialisation of the discipline in the latter part of the Victorian period, with the intellectual and material divergence between the practices of academic and popular history so well described by Leslie Howsam. The pages of popular historical treatments of the Revolt in the early twentieth century, such as G. K. Chesterton’s *Short History of England*, were as innocent of annotation as their mid-Victorian predecessors.

But the distinction, however obvious, may once again prove illusory. Take the case of James Thorold Rogers, the first Professor of Statistics and Economic Science at King’s

College, London and professor of political economy at All Souls, Oxford, whose seven-volume *History of Agriculture and Prices in England* is still in print. His equally authoritative (at least fifteen editions) and frequently cited economic study *Six Centuries of Work and Wages: The History of English Labour*, which devoted a whole chapter to the Peasants' Revolt, had no textual apparatus of any kind.<sup>9</sup> If one considered only the book's publisher, Swan Sonnenschein, its professional credentials would be beyond doubt.

Sonnenschein specialised in sociological and political literature, publishing titles like *English Social Movements*, *Annals of the British Peasantry*, *History of the English Landed Interest*, *The Agricultural Labourer*, *The History of the English Corn Laws*, *Our Mother Earth: The Case for Land Nationalisation*, and *The Origin of Property in Land*. It had on its lists the famous French historian Fustel De Coulanges, the philosopher Bernard Bosanquet, Beatrice Webb, Edward Carpenter and the Marxist historian E. B. Bax. But if one looked only at Rogers's *text*, one could be forgiven for assuming that it was less scholarly than *Alice of Fobbing* -- which came complete with footnotes and appendices -- or Pierce Egan's *Wat Tyler*. The latter fifty-five-part romance might have invented an entirely fictional biography for its hero, and embellished and contradicted the chronicles at vital points in the narrative, but it still headed each chapter with epigraphs from both primary and secondary sources. This was, according to Rosemary Mitchell, "typical of the contemporary 'footnote novel' ... which merged history and fiction, sometimes with a manifestedly didactic intention" (85). Similar trappings of erudition, intended to help readers suspend their disbelief by creating a show of authenticity, were also common in the historical romances of the late nineteenth century. The persistence of scholarly accoutrements in fiction from Walter Scott's time to Rider Haggard's is yet another sign, if one were needed, that the format conventions of the popular and the professional were very permeable indeed.

## Approaches to Illustration

So far we have looked at sources, editions, publishers, and formatting, but what about other types of paratextual information, illustrations for instance? Sober academic tomes like Stubbs's tended to abstain from illustration altogether, but fictional treatments of the Revolt - from Egan's to Henty's -- made full use of it. Pierce Egan was himself an artist, and the weekly numbers of *Wat Tyler* were filled with pictures from the author's own pen, prominently signed. The costumes of the characters appeared to be loosely fifteenth-century in inspiration, but the quality of the execution was noticeably amateur. Egan belonged, after all, to the world of vilely printed cheap literature, bordering not so much on Scott's romances as on the penny dreadfuls with titles like *Sword of Freedom; The Boyhood Days of Jack Straw* -- those "weekly packets of trash" constantly condemned by Victorian cultural commentators (Johns 51-2). *Wat Tyler* was reprinted in a "Large Edition" with "Sixty-Five Large Engravings" specially drawn by W. H. Thwaites in 1851, but though they looked more professional, Thwaites's illustrations replicated the overall manner of Egan's originals.

The famous etching by the Aesthetic painter Sir Edward Burne-Jones, which served as the frontispiece to Morris's *A Dream of John Ball*, hailed from a completely different social and artistic universe to that inhabited by Egan and Thwaites. His portrait of Adam and Eve, shown spinning and digging against a decorative natural backdrop, not only illustrated Ball's notorious slogan, but symbolised the ideal of primitive communism central to the socialist interpretation of the Revolt. In time it became "a paradigmatic image of late-nineteenth-century art and a veritable emblem of British Socialism."<sup>10</sup> Yet another kind of illustration accompanied editions of primary sources and some popular histories. Illuminated manuscripts from the British Museum, the Bibliothèque Royale in Paris, and elsewhere were ransacked for miniatures: H. N. Humphreys's two-volume *Illuminated Illustrations of Froissart*, released in 1844-5, included many coloured plates. The illuminations were also

reproduced as black and white engravings, and a comparison of the scribes' originals with the Victorian engravings found in the Bohn editions of the *Chronicles* yields very interesting results. Although in actuality they came from different British and French sources, all the images are captioned "From a MS. of the Fifteenth Century." Many are cropped, omitting features of the landscape and cityscape, and groups of armed soldiers, or focusing on one moment in time instead of replicating the cartoon-strip-like simultaneity of medieval illustration. Men, horses, and houses are made more realistic, proportional, and symmetrical, barely discernible figures are brought into relief and filled in, and faces are redrawn in line with nineteenth-century notions of physiognomy. The illustrated edition of J. R. Green's best-selling *Short History of the English People*, issued in forty parts from 1892 to 94, also resorted to medieval manuscripts for its images (although it did not take as many liberties), as did G. M. Trevelyan in the illustrated version of his *English Social History*, exactly half a century later. By 1942, of course, photographic reproductions gave little scope for interpretation.

### **An Educational Case Study**

Many of the representations of the Revolt considered so far – especially works like Stubbs's *Constitutional History*, which occupied a place of honour in university teaching of the newly established discipline -- were intended for educational use. But the activity of education was never limited to formal settings such as schools and universities: most propaganda, for instance, had a prominent educational component, whether it was socialist like William Morris's, or religious like the Rev. Heygate's. And nowhere did propaganda and education intersect more closely than in the turn-of-the-century Socialist Sunday School. The essay will conclude by looking at the mediation of the Peasants' Revolt in the printed prospectuses and teaching materials of this unique and understudied movement.

In 1893 Keir Hardie, the chairman of the newly-formed Independent Labour Party, established the Labour Crusaders, a socialist organisation for under-sixteens whose membership quickly reached one and a half thousand. Many of these members attended the Socialist Sunday Schools set up by the Northern and Scottish Labour Churches in order to teach the principles of socialism to the children of activists. By the 1900s, over one hundred schools run by volunteers from the local Clarion, Independent Labour Party, and Social Democratic Federation branches had sprung into existence. In 1901 they began to publish a journal, the *Young Socialist*, and in 1909 the National Council of British Socialist Sunday Schools was formed. Despite a campaign of persecution in the early years by local authorities and the press, the schools survived until after the Second World War, and in that time they produced a wealth of teaching materials, specimen lessons, suggested reading lists, and manuals.

Perhaps the strangest appearance of the Peasants' Revolt in all of this literature cannot even be classified as "printed matter."<sup>11</sup> It is an undated typescript of Part 6 of a *History of Farming in England*, entitled "How Serfdom Ended – The Peasants' Revolt 1381," and it takes the form of a play featuring two narrators, a Chronicler, John Ball, Wat Tyler, two serfs, the King, the Archbishop, the Mayor of London, and a messenger, as well as changes of scene. But *History of Farming* was not a book: it was a manuscript composed by a Comrade Barnsley of Wolverhampton, who gave it to a Comrade Cox of the Halifax School, thinking it would be of interest to the School Movement. Cox passed it on to Jim Simmons, at one time president of the National Council of British Socialist Sunday Schools, but because the work existed in only one copy of twenty-four pages (which Barnsley wanted returned to him), Simmons typed up a few more and sent them to members of the council or committee and the Education Bureau Secretary. In the accompanying letter he explained why he enclosed only the pages on "How Serfdom Ended" – these were the "parts which Com

Barnsley himself thought would be of the greatest interest to us,” and the only ones he had time to type. “The method of presentation is unusual and some Schools may be able to use it in preference to the more orthodox way of presenting History.” But reproduction was a problem: printing the number they were “likely to require” was “too expensive,” while “duplicating” was not only expensive but effort-intensive. “If we do duplicate, Com Barnsley would like to have a few copies.” The subsequent fate of Comrade Barnsley’s history is unknown – it may have been approved for use in the Schools, and socialist children may have acted out the Peasants’ Revolt holding copies of the typescript, as they did other dramatic pieces on various occasions.<sup>12</sup> But in speaking of the material forms, of the transmission and consumption of historical texts, little episodes like this, which completely bypass the world of institutionalised print culture, cannot be forgotten.

The Socialist Sunday School movement did, however, disseminate most of its information through traditional publication channels. Although many documents are undated, post-war publications can offer a good window into the practices of the 1890s and 1900s. In 1919, *Some Suggestions for Socialist Sunday School Teaching* was reprinted by The Worker Press from a Huddersfield Labour newspaper. It provided an outline of teaching goals and readings classified according to age group. Older children, ten to fourteen years, were to be shown “the work achieved by the world’s reformers, artists, poets, literary men and scientists,” in order to “feed the imagination.” Wat Tyler was one of the recommended biographical subjects. A Leaflet for an *International Sunday* lesson suggested giving “examples of the life-work of some great men,” including “Wat Tyler, the revolt against high taxation.” The list of books left the source sufficiently vague: “‘Wat Tyler.’ – From any old English History Book.” The *Model Syllabus of Lessons Arranged for Use In Socialist Sunday Schools*, “Published on behalf of Scottish Socialist Sunday Schools, by Syllabus Sub-Committee” in 1908, was more specific. It recommended J. R. Green’s *Short History* as one



of the Reference Books, and “The Story of John Ball” as one of the “History Lessons” for “Children from 12 to 14 Years,” to be delivered on the eighth of May, the Sunday after the May-Day Demonstration. The well-known educationalist F. G. Gould’s *Course of Study In the Socialist Interpretation of History*, issued by the Young Socialist Education Bureau, included even more detailed reading lists, which featured familiar names like Rogers, Hyndman, and Morris. The course was divided into six sections of four weekly lectures each, and covered “all human history” from “Primitive Man” and “the beginnings of civilization,” to the present day. Section III, on the “Middle Ages, Renaissance and Beginnings of Capitalism,” had this to say about the “Rebellions of workers”:

General unrest came to a head in Wat Tyler’s rebellion of 1381, and serfdom began to break up.

Note that the unrest was assisted by the Preaching Friars (Lollards), who were spreading new religious ideas, afterwards to take shape in Dissent, Puritanism, Nonconformity, Free Churches. John Ball was a priest; and William Morris’s “Dream of John Ball” is here of interest, and can be recommended for reading.

The struggle between the exploiter and the exploited had begun.

Morris, whose historical views were heavily anti-Protestant, would not have welcomed being associated with such an interpretation, but by the 1900s the invocation of his name in this context had become an inevitability. *A Dream of John Ball* was also recommended by George Whitehead – a prolific writer on sex, eugenics, evolution, psychoanalysis, spiritualism, and birth control (among other things) -- in his two-penny pamphlet, *Education in Socialist Sunday Schools*, issued by the Hyde Socialist Church Sunday School Committee from the National Labour Press in Manchester. The local syllabus, Whitehead boasted, was drawn up in accordance with the latest educational theory. Ages 12 to 14 were to be introduced to the history of the fourteenth century via Arthur Conan Doyle’s romance *The White Company*; the next age group, 13 to 15, was to benefit from a course of instruction which duplicated “in an elementary form” that “given in the adult class” (21). Under the subject-heading “History,” “Text-books” included Morris’s *Dream of John Ball* for the

“period of the Peasant’s Revolt,” and “Reference books” consisted mainly of Green’s *Short History of the English People* and Rogers’s *Six Centuries of Work and Wages*, with specific chapters and even page numbers helpfully highlighted.

One can see how a Victorian generation of political, popular, and academic historical texts was kept alive in the twentieth century by being fed into one particular branch of socialist educational provision. Examples like this could be multiplied: one could, for instance, investigate the presentation of the Revolt in the historical-summary sections of mass-produced Board School readers for working-class children. The same child might easily have ended up reading the official account on Monday and the socialist one on Sunday – in *The Child’s Socialist Reader*, for instance, which included a chapter about “The Peasants’ Revolt” that left no doubt about the desired interpretation.<sup>13</sup> The Peasants’ Revolt appeared at all levels of historical production: from the most amateur to the most professional, from the most popular to the most esoteric, and in all possible guises from cheap romance to academic monograph. A lot more could be said about its reception among students, workers, politicians, writers, and dons,<sup>14</sup> but one thing is certain, to read the Revolt in the nineteenth century was to become part of an ongoing project of historical reconstruction.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Maurice 144. In *A History of Agriculture and Prices in England*, Rogers expresses his doubts about accepting “the authority” of Walsingham and Knighton “on such a subject” (1: 98).

<sup>2</sup> Raymond Williams in *Writing in Society* mentions a “popular series of historical novels about Wat Tyler or Jack Cade” in the early to mid-Victorian period (155).

<sup>3</sup> See Juliette Wood, “Folklore Studies at the Celtic Dawn: The Role of Alfred Nutt as Publisher and Scholar.” Alfred Trubner Nutt (son of David Nutt) was an important Celticist and folklorist, founding member and President of the Folklore Society. His wife took over the firm after his death in 1910 and published Robert Frost and suffragist literature. There were also the Grimm and the Northern Libraries, Arthurian Romance series, and Popular Studies in Mythology, Romance, and Folklore.

<sup>4</sup> C. E. Maurice used Johnes’s (144); William Morris had read both the Berners and the Johnes. In 1857 he dedicated the two-volume Johnes translation to Louisa MacDonald.

<sup>5</sup> See David Knowles, “The Rolls Series” and Sylvia Marchant, “The Rolls Series.”

<sup>6</sup> See James M. Dean, “John Ball’s Sermon Theme.”

<sup>7</sup> Leatham quotes Morris and Rogers, Robert Blatchford, editor of the most widely circulated socialist periodical, the *Clarion*, quoted Green in *My Favourite Books*. According to Rogers in *Six Centuries*, Wyclif’s poor priests, “the most active and outspoken” of whom he believed Ball to be, “had honeycombed the minds of the upland folk with what may be called religious socialism”; the Revolt takes its place in the annals as “an insurrection of frantic communism” (268, 255, 254, 261-2); Green used phrases like “the declaration of the rights of man,” “the socialist dreams of the peasantry,” “the socialist peasant leaders,” and “the tyranny of property that then as ever roused the defiance of socialism” (243, 252, 233, 243). In *England in the Age of Wycliffe*, G. M. Trevelyan had to take time out especially to assert that “the attempt to picture the Rising as a communistic movement ignores the plainest facts” (197).

<sup>8</sup> Rogers’s *A History of Agriculture and Prices* and his *A Manual of Political Economy: For Schools and Colleges*, among others, were published by the Clarendon Press (although he used many other publishers, including Macmillan and T. Fisher Unwin).

<sup>9</sup> It expanded but essentially kept to the same narrative as that given in *History of Agriculture* (1: 80-98). That volume also had no footnotes or references, but included a lot of tables of prices, etc.

<sup>10</sup> For a very detailed discussion of Burne-Jones’s frontispiece, its medieval sources and its late-nineteenth-century artistic and intellectual context, see Eisenman 92-110.

<sup>11</sup> All of the items referred to below may be found in the Labour History Archive, Socialist Sunday School, Ivy Tribe Collection, History Related Material, and Box Four. For an overview of the British Socialist Sunday School movement see F. Reid, “Socialist Sunday Schools in Britain, 1892-1939,” and J. Simmons, *Socialist Sunday Schools: Potted History* (typescript of extracts from the *Labour Leader* bearing on the formation of the Socialist Sunday Schools in the Labour History Archive).

<sup>12</sup> In his account of the curricula of American Socialist Sunday Schools, Kenneth Teitelbaum provides a good overview of the use of dramatic scripts, including plays specifically written by socialist educators, some on historical themes.

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<sup>13</sup> “Although there was no Socialist Party then, there were a number of friars or priests” who fulfilled the same function (96).

<sup>14</sup> The Oxford military historian, student of Stubbs, and prolific writer of textbooks, Charles Oman, also wrote about *The Great Revolt of 1381*.

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